

taking place in an art scene. All this applies to Roodkapje's community workshop program documented in this book. But that's privilege on a shoestring. It manifests itself mostly in the (low-budget) public art funding of the space and the program. One day, this remaining privilege may disappear completely, thanks to the simultaneous effects of the democratisation of art practice and the political questioning of the (ontological) status of art, by artists themselves, but also by populist governments. In the larger, non-Western parts of the world, the arts are not a privileged practice or space to begin with.

To date, non-white cube, self-organised, collective, multidisciplinary practice – which often takes place as community events and can take forms as diverse as cooking and self-organised libraries – has mostly been seen as a development within the arts, raising questions about how art should be understood, taught, and presented in the future. But perhaps the larger question (and one that was already virulent in the self-organised artist movements of the 20th century, including Dada, Russian productivism, Fluxus, and the Situationist International) is whether 'art' as a category and system should be sustained at all.



essay

by Katinka de Jonge

How to cook up

Collectivity

A possible recipe (translated by Florian Cramer)

1. Last year I travelled almost every week from Brussels to Rotterdam to learn about an organisation that wished to become a collective. They asked me to guide them in this process, and provide them with advice and support where problems arose. The organisation has existed for almost twenty years, and originated in Rotterdam's underground scene, from a barbershop that had ambitions of becoming a concert venue. The original nature of the organisation was that of a group of people who wanted to organise a different kind of togetherness, and saw hairdressing and listening to live music as a business model that did not yet exist. Later, in addition to musicians, visual artists became involved through one-year residencies, and a small restaurant was established to function as an additional source of income. It became a success, leaving the collective spirit to become somewhat lost over the years due to growth, professionalisation and institutionalisation of the space, which happens with so many small initiatives. So I was puzzled by the question posed: can we reverse this

movement, and recover something of our commonality? Can we learn to work as a collective? What would it take to do that? It sounds utopian, and the fact that the organisation is called Roodkapje ("Little Red Riding Hood") underscores the somewhat fairy-tale nature of their request.

2. Nevertheless, my imagination was sparked, and during my first meetings at Roodkapje, I became struck by how informal and decisive the organisation was (and remains). The mentality of the staff is reminiscent of that of a catering team tasked with running a restaurant. Everyone has both feet on the ground and is direct and well attuned to each other. There is quick action, half a word is often enough. Soon I noticed that the hurriedness of the conversations is also reflected in the hurriedness of the daily business. Roodkapje is a place of improvisation, where all sorts of things are happening in the same space on the same day, yet each time with different people involved. The scenography of the space is constantly being built up and broken down. Every few hours it's time for the next "change of scene," where the set, props, and extras change completely.

3. Along the way, I have several formal and informal conversations with artists who have been involved, as well as with personnel and the director, the self-proclaimed 'wolf' in the Little Red Riding Hood story. I moderate those moments, using tools (especially to induce a slowdown, such as writing instead of speaking, drawing together, introducing certain conversation structures) to pull

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people somewhat out of their habitual roles; trying to fiddle a bit with the structure of the organisation in order to create space to question taken-for-granted assumptions. Together with Simon Kentgens, we also began to organise a public program (So Happy Together) in which external collectives are brought in to share their knowledge, and create encounters between the organisation and the public.

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4. It proves difficult to truly change anything. It is chaotic to coordinate talks, the staff and resident artists do not have enough time to actually turn into actions the things they say during their talks. It also proves difficult to involve the personnel in the public program. The external collectives we invite only share their work with an external audience, disconnected from the organisation's staff. At the same time, internal tensions arise between the resident artists and Roodkapje staff members. The former experience their residencies as far too heavily scheduled, with too little time off in which to produce their individual work. It is suggested from the residents to allow more unstructured time in their residency track.

But the question remains if that is what is needed within Roodkapje, and I'm reminded of Jo Freeman's text *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, in which she writes about groups where there is supposedly no structure, but where there does appear to be an implicit structure, just not named (we'll come back to this later). The Roodkapje

staff, in turn, find themselves with the hot breath of funding bodies down their necks, thinking: we promised to explore collectivity, but also to achieve a certain audience reach, and now we must deliver. In taking a closer look at these frustrations, I notice that both parties are actually caught in the same rushed logic of constantly producing, leaving no time to actually allow some form of collectivity.

5. In my research on artist-run organisations and other collaborations, I found that some groups call themselves a collective, but don't actually function as such. For example, they are more of a support structure that facilitates individual art practices or a shared workspace. Conversely, art organisations that do not call themselves a collective at all, can have moments of great openness and collaboration that are very close to the collective grasp of that organisation. I am beginning to realise that the notion of collectivity in my research is not necessarily consistent with how it is used by different groups, and that within my own framework it is more workable as a practice than as a fixed identity. Collectivity is something we do, not necessarily something we are. And as a consequence: we are a collective when we act as a collective. The question then becomes rather process-oriented: can we practise collectivity, and, if so, what do we need to do so?

This way of dealing with collectivity strongly

By practising collectivity, we get a sense of the meaning of a concept, and it moves from theoretical discourse into our bodies, as it were.

1 Embodiment is a cross-disciplinary concept used in the arts by makers engaged in somatic practices, as well as by anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers and activists (Gabor Maté, Bessel van der Kolk, and Rae Jonson, among others). Embodiment studies the subjective aspect of the body. The body is viewed not as an object, but as a "who we are." In this theory, body and mind are closely linked. Some authors go quite far in this, such as Amanda Blake. She says "Your body is your brain." The body affects emotions, cognition, behaviour, personality, and regulation. In the arts, the term is used in dance and theatre (e.g. Ruth Zaporah's Action Theater), but also visual arts (whether or not linked to education and forms of therapy, e.g. Lygia Clark). A note to make here is that this is a term rooted in Western Enlightenment thinking, as the "body" and the "mind" (in Cartesian thinking) were separated, it became necessary to create a term to describe the relationship between the two and link them back together (for this, see the text: *The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon* to Future Work in Medical Anthropology by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock). It becomes part of our actions, part of our daily routine. Theories around embodiment problematise the distinction between body and thinking: our thoughts and language shape how we feel, and our culture determines how we express it, so there is a constant interchange between abstract concepts and bodily experiences. Further along this line of thought, the question then becomes: how can we embody collectivity? How can we act collectively, feel as a collective, experience a collective moment? What are the requirements for this?

## 6. What Time?

Back to Roodkapje. During one of the conversations with the organisation, the question comes up: what does collective time mean in contrast to Roodkapje's institutional time? Institutional time is monetised time, someone says. It is productivity, there are people on the payroll, and work is done in the context of deadlines and projects. Haste is normal. Doing things more slowly is seen as laziness. In its early days, nobody at Roodkapje

was paid, which often blurred the lines between having fun and working. A parallel is drawn with collectives: in those collectives, there is also communal unpaid time, which is actually necessary for the collective to function. But this should not be confused with how companies use 'play time' to make their employees perform better. It should literally be free time, time not used to recover from work or to do other (unpaid) work such as maintenance tasks. There is also a comment about fair pay, fair practice, isn't that something that gets in the way of this 'hanging-out time'? How can we consider fair pay while ensuring that a group also checks in with each other outside of this paid time? "The real plans are often made when everyone goes to a bar", says one person, or "at the coffee machine, during break time", says another.

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Collective time, on the contrary, is characterised by a degree of unpredictability, being in the moment, not having a preconceived plan or deliberately deviating from the plan. Whereas institutional time is created within the institutional framework, collective time is where this framework is called into question and reflected upon together. When you ask existing collectives when they feel most like a collective, they mention moments of thinking and acting together and coming up with unique ideas: the group is more than the sum of its individual members; a collective voice emerges. It reminds of Helio Oiticica's idea of "creleisure". Creleisure is brought up by him

and Lygia Clark<sup>2</sup> in 1969 within an unpublished text: *The Senses Pointing Towards*

*A New Transformation*, as an attempt to bring art and everyday life closer together: “Creleisure is the non-repressive leisure, opposed to diverted oppressive leisure thinking: a new unconditioned way to battle oppressive systematic ways of life. Its practice, open-practice, is a way of taking hold of a process, a sympathetic creative process, where sense-apprehension is body-apprehension which generates behaviour-action, in a total organic process.”

<sup>2</sup> Lygia Clark is interesting on the sensory experience always relational to the form of embodiment: “Besides the fact that Clark created fascinating objects (...) [They] do not intend to access a bodily non-verbal experience.” explore further because in her art practice she focuses on the sensory experience rather than the understanding that the object is always relational to the viewer (participants). She also attributes this to a form of embodiment: “Besides the fact that Clark created fascinating objects (...) [They] do not intend to access a bodily non-verbal experience.”

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What I find so compelling about this term is that it is about a way of spending time that is not productive, but also differs from leisure time as it is framed in the Western world. It is (as Oiticica also explains later in his text) an intrinsically revolutionary term, a new way of spending time that is certainly creative but also problematises the art object as an expression of this creativity.

In this, the work of art is something along the lines of:

*“an internal-growing proposing experience: proposing to propose.”*

And in doing so, spending creleisure-time is something along the lines of

*“from person to person, a corpora; improvised dialogue which can spread out into a whole chain creating a kind of biological ensemble or what I would call a crepractice. (...) establish a really growing communication on an open level. (...) No corrupted, interested ‘profit’ should be expected—the remarks of ‘it’s nothing’ or ‘what’s the point,’ etc., will pour out; (...)”*

It is, in other words, a proposal for a different behaviour, of a different way of being together. A different way of spending time, not production, not consumption, but time to be creative, to be in the moment, away from a project logic

An important note to make here is that this form of spending time can only occur if basic needs are met, and everyone is sufficiently rested, fed, cared for, and feeling safe, which is not self-evident. This has to do with an increased (attention to) precarity, both of the participants in this time occupation and of the organisation as a whole. Stress is a creeping indicator of precarity. We become accustomed to uncertainty and constant alertness, which seems to greatly hamper the idea of creleisure. How can we organise ourselves in such a way that we can (at least temporarily) overcome this?

## 7. What Space?

If we can think about (the prerequisites of) collective time, we can also look at collective space. Which spaces lend themselves to the creation of collective moments, and what requirements must such a space meet? Thinking back to the public moments of So Happy Together, the layout of the space played an important role as each invited collective was asked how they wanted to design the space. In the preparations of the space these collectives got to know each other. Because of the concrete request to do something together, we deliberately chose not to spend too much time talking about what we would do. Several things turned out to be important for creating a collective space, for example: introducing furniture that could also become something else: wooden blocks that can function as benches, but stacked on top of each other turn into a table, and upright serve as standing tables. Carpets to sit, stand, and lie on, with the visitors deciding how to use and relate to these objects. Nothing should be too determinant of the arrangement of bodies in the space, so a conference table with chairs around it was out of the question.<sup>3</sup>

While that table with chairs around it seems to be the tacit trademark of the institutional space, preferably with a whiteboard or projection screen next to it. How do we get rid of that table?

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### *The Nautonomat Operation*

*Manual* by Raqs Media Collective is a text that keeps returning as an opening to think about a group’s use of space, and what hosting means. In this text, the collective describes what is needed in a space to facilitate a collective conversation:

*“A nautonomat is a craft of autonomy. It is a vehicle, a scenario, a loose, changing, evolving protocol of doing things together and sharing time, ideas and testing a few visions whenever necessary. (...) The nautonomat*

*piloted by nautonomats is itinerant and can ‘pop up’ in different spaces, and occupy different lengths of time in concordance with the increasingly mobile working lives of people in the arts, and their friends. (...)”*

They also clearly state what the Nautonomat should not be:

*“[...] the spatial echoes of a boardroom, a hotel or airport lounge, an office, a classroom or a doctor’s waiting room. These are spaces that kill thought before it can even germinate. Remember, also, that the nautonomat is neither a studio nor a gallery. If anything, it is more like an orbiting clubhouse or a common room, a space for conversation, repose, experiment, disagreement, observation, reflection, play, sleep and joy.”*

Again, this text praises objects that do not yet have a specific form, such as tools (paper, pens, string, clay) and natural objects (wood, stones, wool [“things to hold, weigh and consider”]), and it discourages working with recognisable figures or icons, such as images of celebrities, stuffed animals, matryoshkas or other dolls.

In relation to the space for collectivity, the Nautonomat is primarily a space to encourage a shared imagination, also called by them “the rediscovery of conversation

<sup>4</sup> Although I do not entirely agree with the focus on the “pop up,” especially since I often learn from collectives how important it is to have a settled space, as a firm value to relate to as a group. Of course, the Nautonomat can still be of a temporary nature within this, but again you wonder if that is the right way to engage with that space?

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and collective learning as an art form". Objects with an overly defined form obstruct this imagination.

#### 8. Connecting The Dots

Beyond the two artists-texts that unfolded their thoughts on the necessary conditions for shared time and space, I noticed during this year at Roodkapje that two other ingredients are needed to make collectivity possible. The first ingredient is a common goal, or a common project on which to work. Although that project can also be intrinsic purposelessness, or the goal as endurance: simply staying in existence. Moreover, collectives often arise out of a shared need: not having the right papers and assisting each other in that, not having access to good workspaces and opening a shared workspace, a common social purpose, etc.

Someone from one of the collectives I work with compared it to a ball. You need a ball as a group, that's the game – kicking that ball, getting it somewhere. If you take that ball out of the game, things quickly become personal and the group loses focus, and eventually falls apart. A ball is something that is shared: this can be an art form, an artistic practice, but also a common enemy or a common love. Who or what is Roodkapje's ball? Is it their common projects? Is it the work being produced? Or is Roodkapje's ball rather to keep playing? To keep going? How can we get the ball to be more at the centre of our attention? You'll notice that this particular

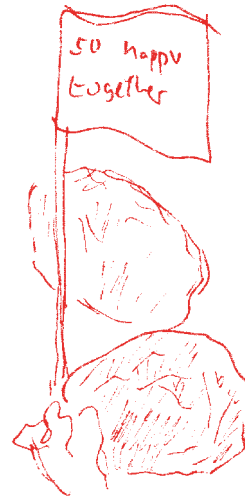
ingredient is related to the productivity mentioned before. Perhaps Roodkapje has too many balls rolling around, and it is necessary to focus a little less on the common projects, but more on the common structure? The rules with which the game is played?

That brings us to the last crucial ingredient, which seems to connect all the conditions mentioned so far. Just as a new time must be invented, and the objects in space need to be both one thing and another, in order to allow for collectivity, there must be some form of transgression. Literally the possibility of questioning, transgressing, and redefining prior (named or unnamed) boundaries. This also relates to another concept floating around Roodkapje: porosity. Projects, moments, and interpersonal relationships are porous in a collective moment, in the sense that there is room for others to enter and change form through them; that there is room for growth, depth, and influence.

In the context of collectivity, transgression and porosity are connected with each other, because transgression is about the right to decide on one's own preconditions, in other words, to co-decide on the rules of the game, porosity is needed to allow this transgression. If everything is rigidly defined, there is no room for transgression, and collectivity will disappear as well.

But this is also where the aforementioned *Tyranny of Structurelessness* resurfaces. A structure must be present in a group for it to be questioned and changed. There is no 'unstructured group', only groups with more or less spelled-out structure.

9. These ingredients are, of course, neither complete nor unambiguous. As with any recipe, there is room for improvisation and adjusting the portions to one's own taste. It is up to the group itself to decide how collectivity is ultimately cooked. My only advice would be not to let the pot simmer on the stove for too long.



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